REFLECTIONS UPON LAUGHTER

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1. Elizabeth Telfer, «Hutcheson's Reflections Upon Laughter», The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 54, n.º 4 (1995): 359-69.

REFLECTIONS UPON LAUGHTER

Rafias in jus malis ridentem alienis
—Horace[2]

To Hibernicus[3]

There is scarce any thing that concerns human nature which does not deserve to be inquired into: I send you some sought upon a very common subject, Laughter, which you may publish, if you think they can be of any use, to help us to understand what so often happens in our own minds, and to know the use for which it is designed in the constitution of our nature.

Aristotle, in his *Art of Poetry*, has very justly explained the nature of one species of laughter, viz. the ridiculing of persons; the occasion or object of which he tells us, is ἁμάρτημα τι καὶ αἶσχος ἀνώδυνον καὶ οὐ φθαρτικόν;[4] "some mistake, or some turpitude, without grievous pain, and not very pernicious, or destructive". But this he never intended as a general account of all sorts of laughter.

But Mr. Hobbes, who very much owes his character of philosopher to his assuming positive solemn airs, which he uses most when

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2. [Y]et your scoundrelly Proteus will slip out from all these ties. When you drag him to court, he will laugh at your expense

Horace, Satire II, part III, verse 72, in *Satires, Epistles, Ars Poetica*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (William Heinemann, 1926), 159

3. Irish

4. "The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others."

Aristotle, 'V', in *On the Art of Poetry*, trans. Ingram Bywater (Clarendon press, 1920)

he is going to assert some palpable absurdity, or some illnatured nonsense, assures us that

> Laughter is nothing else but sudden glory, arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonour.

This notion the authors of the *Spectators*, N.º 47, have adopted from Mr. Hobbes. That bold author having carried on his inquiries, in a singular manner, without regard to authorities, and having fallen into a way of speaking which was much more intelligible than that of the schoolmen soon became agreeable to many free wits of his age. His grand view was to deduce all human actions from self-love: by some bad fortune he has overlooked everything which is generous or kind in mankind, and represents men in that light in which a thorough knave or coward beholds them, suspecting all friendship, love, or social affection, of hypocrisy, or selfish design or fear.

The learned world has often been told that Puffendorf[5] had strongly imbibed Hobbes's first principles, although he draws much better consequences from them; and this last author, as he is certainly much preferable to the generality of the schoolmen in distinct intelligible reasoning, has been made the grand instructor in morals to all who have of late given themselves to that study. Hence it is that the old notions of natural affections, and kind instincts, the *sensus communis*,

5. Samuel von Pufendorf

the *decorum*, and *honestum*, are almost banished out of our books of morals. We must never hear of them in any of our lectures for fear of innate ideas: all must be interest, and some selfish view; laughter itself must be a joy from the same spring.

If Mr. Hobbes's notion be just, then, first, there can be no laughter on any occasion where we make no comparison of ourselves to others, or of our present state to a worse state, or where we do not observe some superiority to ourselves above some other thing: and again, it must follow, that every sudden appearance of superiority over another must excite laughter, when we attend to it. If both these conclusions be false, the notion from whence they are drawn must be so too.

First then, that laughter often arises without any imagined superiority of ourselves, may appear from one great fund of pleasantry, the parody, and burlesque allusion, which move laughter in those who may have the highest veneration for the writing alluded to, and also admire the wit of the person who makes the allusion. Thus many a profound admirer of the machinery in Homer and Virgil has laughed heartily at the interposition of Pallas, in *Hudibras*, to save the bold Talgol from the knight's pistol, presented to the outside of his skull:

> But Pallas came in shape of rust,
> and 'twixt the spring and hammer thrust
> her Gorgon shield, which made the cock
> stand stiff, as 'twere transform'd to stock.[6]

6. Samuel Butler, *Hudibras, in Three Parts, Written in the Time of the Late Wars* (1663–1678; The Project Gutenberg eBook, 2004), Part I, canto II, verses 782-785

And few who read this imagine themselves superior either to Homer or Butler; we indeed generally imagine ourselves superior in sense to the valorous knight, but not in this point, of firing pistols. And pray, would any mortal have laughed, had the poet told, in a simple unadorned manner, that his knight attempted to shoot Talgol, but his pistol was so rusty that it would not give fire? And yet this would have given us the same ground of sudden glory from our superiority over the doughty knight.

Again, to what do we compare ourselves, or imagine ourselves superior, when we laugh at this fantastical imitation of the poetical imagery, and similitudes of the morning?

> The sun, long since, had in the lap
> of Thetis taken out his nap;
> and like a lobster bail'd, the morn
> from black to red began to turn.[7]

Many an orthodox Scotch Presbyterian, which sect few accuse of disregard for the holy scriptures, has been put to it to preserve his gravity, upon hearing the application of Scripture made by his countryman Dr. Pitcairn, as he observed a crowd in the streets about a mason who had fallen along with his scaffold and was overwhelmed with the ruins of the chimney which he had been building, and which fell immediately after the fall of the poor mason: “Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, for they rest from their labours, and their works follow them.” And yet few imagine themselves superior either to the

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7. Butler, *Hudibras*, part II, canto II, verses 29-32.

Later quoted by Henri Bergson.

apostle or the doctor. Their superiority to the poor mason, I am sure, could never have raised such laughter, for this occurred to them before the doctor's consolation. In this case no opinion of superiority could have occasioned the laughter, unless we say that people imagined themselves superior to the doctor in religion: but an imagined superiority to a doctor in religion is not a matter so rare as to raise sudden joy; and with people who value religion, the impiety of another is no matter of laughter.

It is said[8] that when men of wit make us laugh, it is by representing some oddness or infirmity in themselves or others. Thus allusions made on trifling occasions to the most solemn figured speeches of great writers, contain such an obvious impropriety that we imagine ourselves incapable of such mistakes as the alluder seemingly falls into; so that in this case too there is an imagined superiority. But in answer to this, we may observe that we often laugh at such allusions when we are conscious that the person who raises the laugh knows abundantly the justest propriety of speaking and knows, at present, the oddness and impropriety of his own allusion as well as any in company; nay, laughs at it himself. We often admire his wit in such allusions and study to imitate him in it as far as we can. Now, what sudden sense of glory or joy in our superiority can arise from observing a quality in another which we study to imitate, I cannot imagine. I doubt if men compared themselves with the alluder, whom they study to imitate, they would rather often grow grave or sorrowful.

Nay, farther, this is so far from truth that imagined superiority moves our laughter, that one would imagine from some instances the

8. See the Spectator [Note from the original text]

very contrary: for if laughter arose from our imagined superiority, then, the more that any object appeared inferior to us, the greater would be the jest; and the nearer anyone came to an equality with us, or resemblance of our actions, the less we should be moved with laughter. But we see, on the contrary, that some ingenuity in dogs and monkeys, which comes near to some of our own arts, very often makes us merry; whereas their duller actions, in which they are much below us, are no matter of jest at all. Whence the author in the Spectator drew his observation, that the actions of beasts, which move our laughter, bear a resemblance to a human blunder, I confess I cannot guess; I fear the very contrary is true, that their imitation of our grave, wise actions would be fittest to raise mirth in the observer.

The second part of the argument, that opinion of superiority suddenly incited in us does not move to laughter, seems the most obvious thing imaginable. If we observe an object in pain while we are at ease, we are in greater danger of weeping than laughing; and yet here is occasion for Hobbes' *sudden joy*. It must be a very merry state in which a fine gentleman is, when well dressed, in his coach, he passes our streets, where he will see so many ragged beggars, and porters, and chairmen sweating at their labour, on every side of him. It is a great pity that we had not an infirmary or lazar-house to retire to in cloudy weather to get an afternoon of laughter at these inferior objects: Strange that none of our Hobbists banish all canary birds and squirrels, and lapdogs, and pugs, and cats out of their houses, and substitute in their places asses, and owls, and snails, and oysters, to be merry upon! From these they might have higher joys of superiority than from those with whom we now please ourselves. Pride, or an high opinion of ourselves, must be entirely inconsistent with gravity; empti-

ness must always make men solemn in their behaviour; and conscious virtue and great abilities must always be upon the sneer. An orthodox believer, who is very sure that he is in the true way to salvation, must always be merry upon heretics, to whom he is so much superior in his own opinion; and no other passion but mirth should arise upon hearing of their heterodoxy. In general, all men of true sense, and reflection, and integrity, of great capacity for business, and penetration into the tempers and interests of men, must be the merriest little grigs imaginable; Democritus must be the sole leader of all the philosophers; and perpetual laughter must succeed into the place of the long beard,

> ...To be the grace
> both of our wisdom and our face.[9]

9. Butler, *Hudibras*, part I, canto I, verses 241-242

It is pretty strange that the authors whom we mentioned above have never distinguished between the words laughter and ridicule: this last is but one particular species of the former, when we are laughing at the follies of others; and in this species there may be some pretence to allege that some imagined superiority may occasion it. But then there are innumerable instances of laughter where no person is ridiculed; nor does he who laughs compare himself to anything whatsoever. Thus how often do we laugh at some out-of-the-way description of natural objects, to which we never compare our state at all. I fancy few have ever read the *City Shower*[10] without a strong disposition to laughter, and instead of imagining any superiority, are very sensible of a tum of wit in the author which they despair of imitating: thus what relation to our affairs has that simile of *Hudibras*,

> Instead of trumpet and of drum,
> which makes the warriour's stomach come,
> and whets mens valour sharp, like beer
> by thunder turnd'd to vinegar.[11]

The laughter is not here raised against either valour or martial music, but merely by the wild resemblance of a mean event.

And then farther, even in ridicule itself there must be something else than bare opinion to raise it, as may appear from this, that if anyone would relate in the simplest manner these very weaknesses of others, their extravagant passions, their absurd opinions, upon which the man of wit would rally; should we hear the best vouchers of all the facts alleged, we shall not be disposed to laughter by bare narration. Or should one do a real important injury to another, by taking advan-

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10. Jonathan Swift, «A description of a city shower», in *Poems of Jonathan Swift*, D.D., ed. William Ernst Browning, vol. 1 (G. Bell and Sons, 1910)

11. Butler, *Hudibras*, part I, canto II, verses 107-110

tage of his weakness, or by some pernicious fraud let us see another's simplicity, this is no matter of laughter: and yet these important cheats do really discover our superiority over the person cheated, more than the trifling impostures of our humourists. The opinion of our superiority may raise a sedate joy in our minds, very different from laughter; but such a thought seldom arises in our minds in the hurry of a cheerful conversation among friends, where there is often an high mutual esteem. But we go to our closets often to spin out some fine conjectures about the principles of our actions, which no mortal is conscious of in himself during the action; thus the same authors above-mentioned tell us that the desire which we have to see tragical representations is because of the secret pleasure we find in thinking ourselves secure from such evils; we know from what sect this notion was derived.

> Quibus ipse malis fiber es, quia cernere suave.
> —Lucretius.[12]

12.

> 'Tis sweet, when, down the mighty main, the winds
> Roll up its waste of waters, from the land
> To watch another's labouring anguish far,
> Not that we joyously delight that man
> Should thus be smitten, but because 'tis sweet
> To mark what evils we ourselves be spared;

Titus Lucretius Carus, «Book II, proem», in Of the nature of things, trad. Willam Ellery Leonard (Project Gutenberg, 1997)

This pleasure must indeed be a secret one, so very secret, that many a kind compassionate heart was never conscious of it, but felt itself in a continual state of horror and sorrow; our desiring such sights flows from a kind instinct of nature, a secret bond between us and our fellow creatures.

> Naturæ imperio gemimus cum funus adultæ
> virginis occurrit, vel terra clauditur infans, (...) quis enim
> [bonus (...)
> ulla aliena sibi credat mala?
>
> —Juvenal[13]

13.

> By command of nature we groan, when the funeral of an adult
> virgin occurs, or an infant is shut up in the earth,
> and less than the fire of the pile. For what good man, or worthy
> the secret torch, such as the priest of Ceres would have him to be
> thinks any evils alien from himself ?

Juvenal, 'Satire XV', in A New and Literal Translation of Juvenal and Persius, trans. M. Madan, vol. 2 (London, n.d.)

II

TO THE AUTHOR OF THE *DUBLIN JOURNAL*

Humano capiti cervicem pictor equinam
Iungere si vetit, et varias inducere formas
Undique collatis membris, ut turpiter atrum
Desinat in piscem mulier formosa superne;
Spectatum admissi risum teneatis amici?
—Horace[14]

Sir, in my former letter, I attempted to show that Mr. Hobbes' account of laughter was not just. I shall now endeavour to discover some other ground of that sensation, action, passion, or affection, I know not which of them a philosopher would call it.

The ingenious Mr. Addison in his treatise of *The pleasures of the imagination*[15] has justly observed many sublimer sensations than those commonly mentioned among philosophers: he observes, particularly, that we receive sensations of pleasure from those objects which are great, new, or beautiful; and, on the contrary, that objects which

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If some mad painter, by his fancy led,
should join a horse's neck and human head,
and upon limbs from various beasts should bring
plumage from birds of every coloured wing,
so that a handsome female face should grow
down to a fish of hideous form below,
could you, this picture if allowed to see,
graze on the sight from boisterous laughter free ?

The Art of Poetry of Horace, trans. Daniel Bagot (William Blackwood and sons, 1863), verses 1-8

15. «CXV: The pleasures of imagination», in *Essays of Joseph Addison*, ed. James George Frazer, vol. 2 (Macmillan and Co, 1915), 177

are more narrow and confined, or deformed and irregular, give us disagreeable ideas. It is unquestionable that we have a great number of perceptions which can scarcely reduce to any of the five senses, as they are commonly explained; such as either the ideas of grandeur, dignity, decency, beauty, harmony; or, on the other hand, of meanness, baseness, indecency, deformity; and that we apply these ideas not only to material objects, but to characters, abilities, actions.

It may be farther observed that, by some strange associations of ideas made in our infancy, we have frequently some of these ideas recurring along with a great many objects with which they have no other connection than what custom and education, or frequent allusions, give them, or at most, some very distant resemblance. The very affections of our minds are ascribed to inanimate objects, and some animals, perfect enough in their own kind, are made constant emblems of some vices or meanness, whereas other kinds are made emblems of the contrary qualities. For instances of these associations, partly from nature, partly from custom, we may take the following ones: sanctity in our churches, magnificence in public buildings, affection between the oak and ivy, the elm and vine; hospitality in a shade, a pleasant sensation of grandeur in the sky, the sea, and mountains, distinct from a bare apprehension or image of their extension; solemnity and horror in shady woods. An ass is the common emblem of stupidity and sloth, a swine of selfish luxury; an eagle of a great genius; a lion of intrepidity; an ant or bee of low industry and prudent economy. Some inanimate objects have in like manner some accessory ideas of meanness, either for some natural reason, or oftener by mere chance and custom.

Now, the same ingenious author observes, in the *Spectator*, vol. I, N.º 62, that what we call a great genius, such as becomes a heroic poet,

gives us pleasure by filling the mind with great conceptions; and therefore they bring most of their similitudes and metaphors from objects of dignity and grandeur, where the resemblance is generally very obvious. This is not usually called *wit*, but something nobler. What we call grave *wit* consists in bringing such resembling ideas together, as one could scarce have imagined had so exact a relation to each other; or when the resemblance is carried on through many more particulars than we could have at first expected: and this therefore gives the pleasure of surprise. In this serious wit, though we are not solicitous about the grandeur of the images, we must still beware of bringing in ideas of baseness or deformity, unless we are studying to represent an object as base and deformed. Now this sort of wit is seldom apt to move laughter, more than heroic poetry.

That then which seems generally the cause of laughter is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea: this contrast between ideas of grandeur, dignity, sanctity, perfection, and ideas of meanness, baseness, profanity, seems to be the very spirit of burlesque; and the greatest part of our raillery and jest is founded upon it.

We also find ourselves moved to laughter by an overstraining of wit, by bringing resemblances from subjects of a quite different kind from the subject to which they are compared. When we see, instead of the easiness, and natural resemblance, which constitutes true wit, a forced straining of a likeness, our laughter is apt to arise; as also, when the only resemblance is not in the idea, but in the sound of the words. And this is the matter of laughter in the pun.

Let us see if this thought may not be confirmed in many instances. If any writing has obtained an high character for grandeur, sanctity,

inspiration, or sublimity of thoughts, and boldness of images, the application of any known sentence of such writings to low, vulgar, or base subjects, never fails to divert the audience, and set them a laughing. This fund of laughter the ancients had by allusions to Homer: of this the lives of some of the philosophers in Diogenes Laertius supply abundance of instances. Our late burlesque writers derive a great part of their pleasantry from their introducing, on the most trifling occasions, allusions to some of the bold schemes, or figures, or sentences, of the great poets, upon the most solemn subjects. *Hudibras* and *Don Quixote*[16] will supply one with instances of this in almost every page. It were to be wished that the boldness of our age had never carried their ludicrous allusions to yet more venerable writings. We know that allusions to the phrases of holy writ have obtained to some gentlemen a character of wit, and often furnish laughter to their hearers, when their imaginations have been too barren to give any other entertainment. But I appeal to the religious themselves, if these allusions are not apt to move laughter, unless a more strong affection of the mind, a religious horror at the profanity of such allusions, prevents their allowing themselves the liberty of laughing at them. Now in this affair I fancy anyone will acknowledge that an opinion of superiority is not at all the occasion of the laughter.

Again, any little accident to which we have joined the idea of meanness befalling a person of great gravity, ability, dignity, is a matter of laughter, for the very same reason; thus the strange contortions of the body in a fall, the dirtying of a decent dress, the natural func-

16. Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, I (1605; Montaner y Simón, 1880)

tions which we study to conceal from sight, are matter of laughter when they occur to observation in persons of whom we have high ideas. Nay, the very human form has the ideas of dignity so generally joined with it, that even in ordinary persons such mean accidents are matter of jest; but still the jest is increased by the dignity, gravity, or modesty of the person, which shows that it is this contrast, or opposition of ideas of dignity and meanness, which is the occasion of laughter.

We generally imagine in mankind some degree of wisdom above other animals, and have high ideas of them on this account. If then along with our notion of wisdom in our fellows, there occurs any instance of gross inadvertence, or great mistake, this is a great cause of laughter. Our countrymen are very subject to little trips of this kind, and furnish often some diversion to their neighbours, not only by mistakes in their speech, but in actions. Yet even this kind of laughter cannot well be said to arise from our sense of superiority. This alone may give a sedate joy, but not be a matter of laughter, since we shall find the same kind of laughter arising in us, where this opinion of superiority does not attend it, for if the most ingenious person in the world, whom the whole company esteems, should through inadvertent hearing, or any other mistake, answer quite from the purpose, the whole audience may laugh heartily, without the least abatement of their good opinion. Thus we know some very ingenious men have not in the least suffered in their characters by an extemporary pun, which raises the laugh very readily; whereas a premeditated pun, which diminishes our opinion of a writer, will seldom raise any laughter.

Again, the more violent passions, as fear, anger, sorrow, compassion, are generally looked upon as something great and solemn; the

beholding of these passions in another strikes a man with gravity. Now if these passions are artfully, or accidentally, raised upon a small or fictitious occasion, they move the laughter of those who imagine the occasions to be small and contemptible, or who are conscious of the fraud: this is the occasion of the laugh in biting, as they call such deceptions.

According to this scheme, there must necessarily arise a great diversity in men's sentiments of the ridiculous in actions or characters, according as their ideas of dignity and wisdom are various. A truly wise man, who places the dignity of human nature in good affections and suitable actions, may be apt to laugh at those who employ their most solemn and strong affections about what to the wise man appears perhaps very useless or mean. The same solemnity of behaviour and keenness of passion, about a place or ceremony, which ordinary people only employ about the absolute necessaries of life, may make them laugh at their betters. When a gentleman of pleasure, who thinks that good fellowship and gallantry are the only valuable enjoyments of life, observes men with great solemnity and earnestness, heaping up money without using it, or encumbering themselves with purchases and mortgages which the gay gentleman with his paternal revenues thinks very silly affairs, he may make himself very merry upon them: and the frugal man, in his tum, makes the same jest of the man of pleasure. The successful gamester, whom no disaster forces to lay aside the trifling ideas of an amusement in his play, may laugh to see the serious looks and passions of the gravest business arising in the loser, amidst the ideas of a recreation. There is indeed in these last cases an opinion of superiority in the laughter; but this is not the proper occasion of his laughter; otherwise I see not how we should

ever meet with a composed countenance anywhere. Men have their different relishes of life, most people prefer their own taste to that of others; but this moves no laughter, unless, in representing the pursuits of others, they do join together some whimsical image of the opposite ideas.

In the more polite nations, there are certain modes of dress, behaviour, ceremony, generally received by all the better sort, as they are commonly called: to these modes, ideas of decency, grandeur, and dignity are generally joined. Hence men are fond of imitating the mode; and if in any polite assembly, a contrary dress, behaviour, or ceremony appear, to which we have joined in our country the contrary ideas of meanness, rusticity, sullenness, a laugh does ordinarily arise, or a disposition to it, in those who have not the thorough good breeding, or reflection, to restrain themselves, or break through these customary associations.

And hence we may see, that what is counted ridiculous in one age or nation, may not be so in another. We are apt to laugh at Homer when he compares Ajax unwillingly retreating to an ass driven out of a

cornfield;[17] or when he compares him to a boar;[18] or Ulysses tossing all night without sleep through anxiety to a pudding frying on the coals.[19] Those three similes have got low mean ideas joined to them with us,

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17. Or as some lazy ass that has had many a cudgel broken about his back, when he into a field begins eating the corn—boys beat him but he is too many for them, and though they lay about with their sticks they cannot hurt him; still when he has had his fill they at last drive him from the field —even so did the Trojans and their allies pursue great Ajax, ever smiting the middle of his shield with their darts.

'Book XI', in *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Samuel Butler (The Project Gutenberg, 2000)

18. But the Achaeans did not lose it long, for Ajax, foremost of all the Danaans after the son of Peleus alike in stature and prowess, quickly rallied them and made towards the front like a wild boar upon the mountains when he stands at bay in the forest glades and routs the hounds and lusty youths that have attacked him—even so did Ajax son of Telamon passing easily in among the phalanxes of the Trojans, disperse those who had bestridden Patroclus and were most bent on winning glory by dragging him off to their city.

'Book XVII'.

19. Thus he chided with his heart, and checked it into endurance, but he tossed about as one who turns a paunch full of blood and fat in front of a hot fire, doing it first on one side and then on the other, that he may get it cooked as soon as possible, even so did he turn himself about from side to side, thinking all the time how, single handed as he was, he should contrive to kill so large a body of men as the wicked suitors.

'Book XX', in The Odyssey by Homer, trans. Samuel Butler (The Project Gutenberg, 1999)

which it is very probable they had not in Greece in Homer's days; nay, as to one of them, the boar, it is well known that in some countries of Europe, where they have wild boars for hunting, even in our times, they have not these low sordid ideas joined to that animal, which we have in these kingdoms, who never see them but in their dirty sties, or on dunghills. This may teach us how impermanent a great many jests are, which are made upon the style of some other ancient writings, in ages when manners were very different from ours, though perhaps fully as rational, and every way as human and just.

III

To the author of the *Dublin Journal*

...Ridiculum acri
fortius et melius magnas plerumque secat res[20]

Sir, to treat this subject of laughter gravely may subject the author to a censure like to that which Longinus makes upon a prior treatise of *the Sublime*[21], because wrote in a manner very unsuitable to the subject. But yet it may be worth our pains to consider the effects of laughter, and the ends for which it was implanted in our nature, that thence we may know the proper use of it: which may be done in the following observations.

First, we may observe, that laughter, like many other dispositions of our mind, is necessarily pleasant to us, when it begins in the natural manner, from one perception in the mind of something ludicrous, and does not take its rise unnaturally from external motions in the body. Everyone is conscious that a state of laughter is an easy and agreeable state, that the recurring or suggestion of ludicrous images tends to dispel fretfulness, anxiety, or sorrow, and to reduce the mind to an easy, happy state; as on the other hand, an easy and happy state is that in which we are most lively and acute in perceiving the ludicrous in objects. Anything that gives us pleasure puts us also in a fitness for laughter, when something ridiculous occurs; and ridiculous objects, occurring to a soured temper, will be apt to recover it to easiness. The implanting then a sense of the ridiculous, in our nature, was giving us an avenue to pleasure, and an easy remedy for discontent and sorrow.

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20. "Jesting oft cuts hard knots more forcefully and effectively than gravity".

Horace, Satire I, part X, verses 14-5, in *Satires, Epistles, Ars Poetica*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (William Heinemann, 1926), 117

21. Weiske, trans., *Longinus on the Sublime* (S. Cornish and Co., n.d.)

Again, laughter, like other associations, is very contagious: our whole frame is so sociable, that one merry countenance may diffuse cheerfulness to many; nor are they all fools who are apt to laugh before they know the jest, however curiosity in wise men may restrain it, that their attention may be kept awake.

We are disposed by laughter to a good opinion of the person who raises it, if neither ourselves nor our friends are made the butt. Laughter is none of the smallest bonds to common friendships, though it be of less consequence in great heroic friendships.

If an object, action, or event, be truly great in every respect, it will have no natural relation or resemblance to anything mean or base; and consequently no mean idea can be joined to it with any natural resemblance. If we make some forced remote jests upon such subjects, they can never be pleasing to a man of sense and reflection, but raise contempt of the ridiculer, as void of just sense of those things which are truly great. As to any great and truly sublime sentiments, we may perhaps find that, by a playing upon words, they may be applied to a trifling or mean action, or object; but this application will not diminish our high idea of the great sentiment. He must be of a poor trifling temper who would lose his relish of the grandeur and beauty of that noble sentence of the holy writ, mentioned in the former paper, from the doctor's application of it. *Virgil Travesty*[22] may often come into an ingenious man's head, when he reads the original, and make him uneasy with impertinent interruptions, but will never diminish his admiration of Virgil. Who dislikes that line in Homer, by which Diogenes the Cynic answered his neighbour at an execution, who was inquiring into

22. Scarron, *Le Virgile travesty en vers burlesques* (Toussant Quinet, 1648)

the cause of the criminal's damnation, which had been the counterfeiting of the ancient purple?

ἔλλαβε πορφύρεος θάνατος καὶ μοῖρα κραταιή.[23]

Let any of our wits try their mettle in ridiculing the opinion of a good and wise mind governing the whole universe; let them try to ridicule integrity and honesty, gratitude, generosity, or the love of one's country, accompanied with wisdom. All their art will never diminish the admiration which we must have for such dispositions, wherever we observe them pure and unmixed with any low views, or any folly in the exercise of them.

When in any object there is a mixture of what is truly great, along with something weak or mean, ridicule may, with a weak mind which cannot separate the great from the mean, bring the whole into disesteem, or make the whole appear weak or contemptible: but with a person of just discernment and reflection it will have no other effect but to separate what is great from what is not so.

When any object either good or evil is aggravated and increased by the violence of our passions, or an enthusiastic admiration, or fear, the application of ridicule is the readiest way to bring down our high imaginations to a conformity to the real moment of importance of the

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23. "The bloody hand fell to the ground, and the shades of death, with fate that no man can withstand, came over his eyes".

'Book V', in *The Iliad of Homer,* trans. Samuel Butler (The Project Gutenberg, 2000), verse 83

See also note 14 in *Appendix Hutcheson Reflections Upon Laughter*, page 114

affair. Ridicule gives our minds as it were a bend to the contrary side; so that upon reflection they may be more capable of settling in a just conformity to nature.

Laughter is received in a different manner by the person ridiculed, according as he who uses the ridicule evidences good-nature, friendship, and esteem of the person whom he laughs at, or the contrary.

The enormous crime or grievous calamity of another is not itself a subject which can be naturally turned into ridicule: the former raises horror in us, and hatred, and the latter pity. When laughter arises on such occasions, it is not excited by the guilt or the misery. To observe the contortions of the human body in the air, upon the blowing up of an enemy's ship, may raise laughter in those who do not reflect on the agony and distress of the sufferers; but the reflecting on this distress could never move laughter of itself. So Some fantastic circumstances accompanying a crime may raise laughter; but a piece of cruel barbarity, or treacherous villainy, of itself, must raise very contrary passions. A jest is not ordinary in an impeachment of a criminal, or an invective oration: it rather diminishes than increases the abhorrence in the audience, and may justly raise contempt of the orator for an unnatural affectation of wit. Jesting is still more unnatural in discourses designed to move compassion toward the distressed. A forced unnatural ridicule, on either of these occasions, must be apt to raise, in the guilty or the miserable, hatred against the laughter; since it must be supposed to show from hatred in him toward the object of his ridicule, or from want of all compassion. The guilty will take laughter to be a triumph over him as contemptible; the miserable will interpret it as hardness of heart, and insensibility of the calamities of another. This is

the natural effect of joining to either of these objects mean ludicrous ideas.

If smaller faults, such as are not inconsistent with a character in the main amiable, be set in a ridiculous light, the guilty are apt to be made sensible of their folly, more than by a bare grave admonition. In many of our faults, occasioned by too great violence of Some passion, we get such enthusiastic apprehensions of some objects, as lead us to justify our conduct: the joining of opposite ideas or images allays this enthusiasm; and, if this be done with good nature, it may be the least offensive, and most effectual, reproof.

Ridicule upon the smallest faults, when it does not appear to flow from kindness, is apt to be extremely provoking, since the applying of mean ideas to our conduct discovers contempt of us in the ridiculer, and that he designs to make us contemptible to others.

Ridicule applied to those qualities or circumstances in one of our companions, which neither he nor the ridiculer thinks dishonourable, is agreeable to everyone; the butt himself is as well pleased as any in company.

Ridicule upon any small misfortune or injury, which we have received with sorrow or keen resentment, when it is applied by a third person, with appearance of good-nature, is exceeding useful to abate our concern or resentment, and to reconcile us to the person who injured us, if he does not persist in his injury.

From this consideration of the effects of laughter it may be easy to see for what cause, or end, a sense of the ridiculous was implanted in human nature, and how it ought to be managed.

It is plainly of considerable moment in human society. It is often a great occasion of pleasure, and enlivens our conversation exceedingly,

when it is conducted by good-nature. It spreads a pleasantry of temper over multitudes at once; and one merry easy mind may by this means diffuse a like disposition over all who are in company. There is nothing of which we are more communicative than of a good jest: and many a man, who is incapable of obliging us otherwise, can oblige us by his mirth, and really insinuate himself into our kind affections, and good wishes.

But this is not all the use of laughter. It is well-known that our passions of every kind lead us into wild enthusiastic apprehensions of their several objects. When any object seems great in comparison of ourselves, our minds are apt to run into a perfect veneration: when an object appears formidable, a weak mind will run into a panic, an unreasonable, impotent horror. Now in both these cases, by our sense of the ridiculous, we are made capable of relief from any pleasant, ingenious well-wisher, by more effectual means, than the most solemn, sedate reasoning. Nothing is so properly applied to the false grandeur, either of good or evil, as ridicule: nothing will sooner prevent our excessive admiration of mixed grandeur, or hinder our being led by that, which is, perhaps, really great in such an object, to imitate also and approve what is really mean.

I question not but the jest of Elijah upon the false deity, whom his countrymen had set up, had been very effectual to rectify their notions of the divine nature– as we find that like jests have been very seasonable in other nations. Baal, no doubt, had been represented as a great personage of unconquerable power: but how ridiculous does the image appear, when the prophet sets before them, at once, the poor ideas which must arise from such a limitation of nature as could be represented by their statues, and the high ideas of omniscience, and om-

nipotence, with which the people declared themselves possessed by their invocation: "Cry aloud, either he is talking, or pursuing, or he is on a journey, or he is asleep."[24]

This engine of ridicule, no doubt, may be abused, and have a bad effect upon a weak mind; but with men of any reflection, there is little fear that it will ever be very pernicious. An attempt of ridicule before such men, upon a subject every way great, is sure to return upon the author of it. One might dare the boldest wit in company with men of sense, to make a jest upon a completely great action, or character. Let him try the story of Scipio and his fair captive, upon the taking of Cartagena[25], or the old story of Pylades and Orestes[26]; I fancy he would sooner appear in a fool's coat himself, than he could put either of these characters in such a dress. The only danger is in objects of a mixed nature before people of little judgment, who, by jests upon the weak side, are sometimes led into neglect, or contempt, of that which is truly valuable in any character, institution, or office. And this may show us the impertinence, and pernicious tendency of general undistinguished jests upon any character, or office, which has been too much over-

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24. From 1 Kings 18:27, thought I'm not clear on exactly which translation. The King James Bible seems to be the closest.

25. The episode of Scipion's mercy is in

Titi Livi, 'XXVI (50-51)', in *Ab Urbe Condita*, IV (Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1964) Die Enthaltsamkeit des Scipio, by Domenico Beccafumi

26. This pair of friends are together in many plays, as in

'Cheophorae', in *The Lyrical Dramas Aeschylus*, trans. John Stuart Blackie (The Project Gutenberg, 2019)

rated. But, that ridicule may be abused, does not prove it useless, or unnecessary, more than a like possibility of abuse would prove all our senses and passions impertinent or hurtful. Ridicule, like other edged tools, may do good in a wise man's hands, though fools may cut their fingers with it, or be injurious to an unwary bystander.

The rules to avoid abuse of this kind of ridicule are, first, either never to attempt ridicule upon what is every way great, whether it be any great being, character, or sentiments; or, if our wit must sometimes run into allusions, on low occasions, to the expressions of great sentiments, let it not be in weak company, who have not a just discernment of true grandeur. And, secondly, concerning objects of a mixed nature, partly great, and partly mean, let us never tum the meanness into ridicule without acknowledging what is truly great, and paying a just veneration to it. In this sort of jesting we ought to be cautious of our company.

> Discit enim citius, meminitque libentius illud,
> quod quis deridet, quam quod probat et veneratur.
> —Horace.[27]

Another valuable purpose of ridicule is with relation to smaller vices, which are often more effectually corrected by ridicule[28], than by grave admonition. Men have been laughed out of faults which a sermon could not reform; nay, there are many little indecencies which are

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27. "[F]or men more quickly learn and more gladly recall what they deride than what they approve and esteem."

Horace, Epistle II, part I, verse 262, in Satires, Epistles, Ars Poetica, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (William Heinemann, 1926), 419

improper to be mentioned in such solemn discourses. Now ridicule, with contempt or ill-nature, is indeed always irritating and offensive; but we may, by testifying a just esteem for the good qualities of the person ridiculed, and our concern for his interests, let him see that our ridicule of his weakness flows from love to him, and then we may hope for a good effect. This then is another necessary rule, that along with our ridicule of smaller faults we should always join evidences of good-nature and esteem.

As to jests upon imperfections, which one cannot amend, I cannot see of what use they can be: men of sense cannot relish such jests; foolish trifling minds may by them be led to despise the truest merit, which is not exempted from the casual misfortunes of our moral state. If these imperfections occur along with a vicious character, against which people should be alarmed and cautioned, it is below a wise man to raise aversions to bad men from their necessary infirmities, when they have a juster handle from their vicious dispositions.

I shall conclude this essay with the words of father Malebranche, upon the last subject of laughter, the smaller misfortunes of others. That author amidst all his visions shows sometimes as fine sense as any of his neighbours:

> There is nothing more admirably contrived than those natural correspondences observable between the inclinations of men's minds and the motions of their bodies [...] All this secret chain-work is a miracle, which can never sufficiently be

28. This idea is often attributed to Henri Bergson, but here it is, 175 years before Bergson would publish, also in a journal, and also in three parts, his own ideas about the comic.

> admired or understood. Upon sense of some surprising evil, which appears too strong for one to overcome with his own strength, he raises, suppose, a loud cry: This cry, forced out by the disposition of our machine, pierces the ears of those who are near, and makes them understand it, let them be of what nation or quality soever; for it is the cry of all nations, and all conditions, as indeed it ought to be. It raises a commotion in their brain, […] and makes them run to give succour without so much as knowing it. It soon obliges their will to desire, and their understanding to contrive, provided that it was just and according to the rules of society. For an indiscreet cry-out, made upon no occasion, or out of an idle fear, produces, in the assistants, indignation or laughter instead of pity. […] That indiscreet cry naturally produces aversion, and desire of revenging the affront offered to nature, if he that made it without cause, did it wilfully: but it ought only to produce the passion of derision, mingled with some compassion, without aversion or desire of revenge, if it were a fright, that is, a false appearance of a pressing exigency which caused the clamour. For scoff or ridicule is necessary to reassure and correct the man as fearful; and compassion to succour him as weak. It is impossible to conceive anything better ordered.[29]

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29. Father Malebranche, «Of the third natural inclination, viz. the friendship we have for other men., book IV, chapter XIII», en Treatise concerning the search after truth, 2.ª ed., trad. T Taylor (W. Bowyer, 1700), 166

Nicholas de Malebranche, «Livre IV, Chapirtre XIII», en De la recherche de la vérité. Ou l'on traitte de la nature de l'esprit de l'homme, & de l'usage qu'il en doit faire pour éviterlerreur dans les sciences, 4.ª ed. (A. Pralard, 1678), 282

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